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Author's Preface

A Context

> I have always adored the sea, and now that I can no longer go for a swim, I have surrounded myself with it.
>
> —HENRI MATISSE, "The Swimming Pool"

Growing up in Brooklyn before World War II, I would sit by the window and write poems. From the age of eight I delighted in the arts. Alternating between poetry and drawing, escaping piano practice into my own tunes, by adolescence I turned to painting, sketching, and then sculpture, while continuing to write poems, stories, and prose pieces. When my pursuits seemed diffuse, at twenty I chose to focus on writing. I expected to resume my efforts in the visual and plastic arts "later on," a horizon stubbornly remote. In the manner of Matisse surrounding himself with the sea, I continued to immerse myself in art. I frequented museums and galleries and occasionally wrote poems about works that had moved me. Decades later I learned the category had a name: "ekphrastic poems." Recently, I thought this volume might be devoted exclusively to them.

More and more, however, politics was cramming my consciousness. It jumped fences. It mixed and merged

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with aesthetic material. Although many of the art works that interested me had a strong political context, my category restriction seemed arbitrary, cumbersome; the sense of urgency, profound. I realized that war—even wars beginning long before World War II—had shaped my family's life and affected my own.

My father, Nicholas, born and raised in Lebanon, was orphaned at thirteen. His mother was Lebanese; his father had been born on the island of Samos, Greece. Thus he, like his father, held dual citizenship of Lebanon and Greece. As a potential "Greek" enemy, at sixteen my father, his sister, and a brother were sent into exile in Turkey for a year during World War I. I recall his vivid stories of the time and of his father's father: a vigorous, red-bearded man who had fought in the Greek War of Independence. After World War I, Nicholas and his friends leafleted Tripoli in secret, at night, worrying the British and French authorities that there was a widespread movement for Lebanese independence.

My mother, Georgette, was born to Lebanese parents who lived in Mersin, a coastal city of Asia Minor (Turkey). Her father disappeared after taking a train to the interior. A year later, he was assumed to be the victim of a political assassination and was declared legally dead. His widow and eight of their nine children immigrated to the United States, where they settled in Brooklyn. My father had emigrated shortly before, naïvely trusting a report of free engineering education in Detroit. When he arrived there, it happened to be a time of severe economic distress. Disappointed, he was happy to join his friends from abroad—my mother and her family—in New York.

I grew up knowing only one president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom I, like my family, profoundly

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admired. We shared the excitement—and benefits—of the New Deal and put an "NRA: We Do Our Part" sign in the window. One of my maternal uncles spent a summer working in a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camp. I had a first-class education in public elementary and high schools (we had no junior highs). In the lower school, in addition to art and music appreciation, gym, clubs, and a literary magazine, boys studied shop (carpentry) and girls studied sewing. We sewed our graduation dresses (a practical economy). Voted "class athlete" in elementary school, I was graduated from Girls Commercial High School as "class poet." An academic school in Brooklyn, it offered a sumptuous variety of courses, including poetry. There, a radiant Eleanor Roosevelt memorably addressed us in the auditorium. We enjoyed our large swimming pool and faced a rigid graduation requirement to swim its length.

This was an era of grand projects (like dams) and heroes. Of the latter, I had many, both literary and political. Thomas Paine was a favorite, along with the Brooklyn Dodgers' baseball team. In high school, civics, livened by current events, lifted our pride in the United States. We admired its new "Good Neighbor Policy" toward Latin America and fostering of the United Nations, whose anthem we sang. It seemed just that a woman, Frances Perkins, had been named Secretary of Labor. Roosevelt himself was a hero. Confined to a wheelchair, he faced down powerful negative forces and showed practical concern for common people in the Depression. Our respect and support carried him through four elections until his death on April 12, 1945, as World War II was ending.

Afterward we learned of the hideous "Final Solution," the systematic extermination of the Jews by the Nazis. Jews were recognized as victims of a terrible human and

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moral atrocity. The complicated history of Palestine, nevertheless, following the end of the British Mandate and the United Nations proposal of partition into Israel and Palestine, has remained one of war and conflict in the area ever since.

And so art and politics, politics and art, moving together, bestir these pages. They continue to engage some of my deepest concerns. May they stir your thoughts as well.

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Acknowledgments

Poems have previously appeared in various publications, as follows:

Certain Personae: "Kwansaba for Richard Wright" (2008), "Kwansaba for Amiri Baraka" (2005), and "Kwansaba for Jayne Cortez" (2006), *Drumvoices Revue* (tribute issues). "Song for Angela Davis in the Women's House of Detention," *Children of the House Afire / More Notes on 94th Street* (1976), reprinted and revised in *New York Poems* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005). "Naked Woman Walks Down the Street," *Conversation with a Stonemason* (New York: IKON, 2003). "Chanel, Arbus, Duccio," *And Then* 14 (2008): 98; "Lincoln's Summer House," *And Then* 15 (2010): 56. "John Updike and My Mother," *Long Island Sounds: 2009, An Anthology of Poetry* (Southampton, N.Y.: North Sea Poetry Scene Press, 2009).

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2005); section 3, from *Country: An Organic Poem* (Merrick, N.Y.: Cross-Cultural Communications, 1998). "April 2004," *Newsday*, April 30, 2004. "A Chipped Tooth," *The Long-Islander*, "Walt's Corner," January 14, 2010, p. A9. "New York Epic," *Banipal* (United Kingdom) 29 (Summer 2007): 31–33.

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To all the above and to their editors, grateful acknowledgment is made.

Once again I extend my deepest gratitude to Mary Selden Evans for her ever-replenishing faith in all my work. Lynn P. Hoppel designed a brilliant cover. My appreciation to the editorial/production staff for their diligent attention.

To Dana Marie Vogel, first reader of my poetry, and to Gregory Melhem Vogel, first reader of my prose, I remain profoundly indebted for critical help and judgment. To George Meyer, my joy in his steadfast poetic regard.

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Certain Personae

This is a subtle truth:
Whatever you love, you are.

—JELALUDDIN RUMI (1207–1273)

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Kwansaba for Richard Wright

You kept watch as, bearing scars, seen
and unseen, you headed North, your hazy
notion: dignity, a life that could be
lived devoid of fear or shame, with
natural respect, and free to wrest some
meaning from the pain you had endured
beneath the stoic witness of the stars.

Poet/teacher/scholar Eugene B. Redmond, inventor of the kwansaba, defines it thus in his magazine *Drumvoices:* "The kwansaba, a 49-word poetic form invented during the Writers Club's 1995 workshop season (in East St. Louis), consists of seven lines of seven words each, with no word containing more than seven letters. (Think 7-7-7!) Exceptions to the seven-letter rule are proper nouns and some foreign terms." In submitting my poem for the Richard Wright Centennial issue of *Drumvoices Revue* (vol. 16, nos. 1–2, 2008), I wrote Redmond, "The closing passage of his *Black Boy* is so beautiful that I used it as the epigraph to the second part of my book-length poem *Country: An Organic Poem* (1998), about the United States. The kwansaba is based on this quotation. I hope I did it—and this great writer—justice."

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Kwansaba for Amiri Baraka

Proud Black bridge to nonskin politic, you
pour your molten steel of poems from
a lectern pound their music into stars
free their drum voice talking blues talk
jazz talk race rising talk people power
talk across borders raising hearts raising fists
radiant with unity rays of constant change

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Kwansaba for Jayne Cortez

Drums earth sweat hot jazz cool blues
and Yoruba gods anoint your brain to
birth your poems from heart and bone
burst from the navel of furious dreams
while finger snaps and left foot taps
rhythms of thunder whose wild new trails
rise black within you leading the steps.

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Song for Angela Davis in the Women's House of Detention

angela davis angela davis
body is caged
but your mind goes out to the street
like a panther passing through stone
staining ground with immovable shadows

truth is
that last light in the eye of pain
will not close with the lid of a coffin
until every grave empties its light
every gutter runs grief to the sewer
until grief is flowing free
around every island
and the world drowns in unused dreams
and the world drowns in unused dreams

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Naked Woman Walks Down the Street

for B., E., and G.

majestic
a living statue
with a train of curious children
who crown her with laughter
and shrieks. Before she
rounds the corner to be plucked
into a police car, I see her lead
an army of homeless people who rise up from Penn Station
and Grand Central and the Port Authority Bus Terminal
and the next block. And the woman is clothed
in rainbow and light from hummingbird wings.
Her followers turn to moving stone and bronze.
They drop off in ones and twos
along Broadway, stationing themselves
at the head of subway stairs.
Their hands are raised and their fists are clenched.
Their stone and bronze children are pointing.
One cannot run past without touching them.
The touch is electric
to feel those statues—
their malice, their might.

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Chanel, Arbus, Duccio

Three Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum

I

Robed in the shimmery moment's flow of fabric,
viewers glide their sinuous inquiry, thread
columns through translucent
decades of flat women
pressed to mannequins, draped
and beaded black or pallid hues.
Phantom fingers (one is thimbled) stitch
with finest needles, dip into silk
or trim wool suits with braid;
one sly droplet of blood,
sucked quickly.

II

Diane Arbus: Glaring portraits, meditations
on Coney Island, a nudist colony, the street
where teenagers caught in a morphing minute
between the years before and decades after,
stripped of pose, exposed to raucous light,
trusting, suspicious, fierce, fearful of
you and the camera blade
releasing skin to paper.

III

Duccio of Siena
sets his small Madonna and Child

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behind a parapet,
the black-draped mother,
child in symbolic red,
stylized, with tiny Jesus about to grow
into his inheritance, future already
worn into his face,
and his mother's.

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John Updike and My Mother

I think you wrote those closing sonnets for us,
not for the page that held your rising wreckage
inches above the flood, before mere words
would claim you whole. You spent those few red leaves
of energy like autumn glimpsing winter
in a whirling gust, telling us how it is,
that we are not alone nor will we be
despite the final solitude, that one can
make the last throw on a potter's wheel
a formal taking leave, its strict release
gracing the turn that wrenches free of time.

This is the way I saw and see my mother,
who forty years ago slid past my clutching,
my fierce yearning poised to follow her.

But she had left
her spirit-breath, her loving bones for me
to introject the strength and beauty shed
to shape my legacy. Love comes from life
and from the quiet page. A cradle and a platform
where we launch our spirits, power we share,
deepening life, regenerating it.

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Lincoln's Summer House

In Lincoln's Summer House there was no peace,
though miles from importuning citizens
who streamed to the White House, certain of his aid.

The Summer House, a wartime gift to the nation,
stood watch beside the newly built Veterans' Home
where Lincoln sometimes dined with the servicemen
and cheered them by his presence, spoke and ate
whatever simple meals they all might share,
with Rock Creek National Cemetery dug behind them.

From his window the president watched the Union dead.
Hour by hour they were carted in,
averaged thirty-eight a day, were measured
by coffins buried in strict rows, hour by
hour. Young men silent, stiff, used up.

One studies Lincoln's face, the monumental
grief carved into it, the field of sorrows
fled to lenses of his eyes entrapped
in hollow hues of blue and black and gray.

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Poem for Elizabeth Cady Stanton

On the Occasion of Naming 250 West Ninety-fourth Street, "The Stanton," November 11, 2007

I stand where you stood, Elizabeth Cady Stanton,
foremother extraordinary, born in Johnstown, New York,
November 12, 1815, daughter of
Daniel Cady and Margaret Livingston Cady,
eighth of eleven children, five of whom died
in infancy. You were the guide of our painful footsteps
to women's suffrage. For yourself you wanted
a full, woman's life and more, and you made it
to your own unique measure, bearing seven
children, making speeches for women's rights
when they had none, and writing, writing, writing
after all that reading in your father's law library
as a young girl.
Early on you debated
legal issues with his law clerks: how the law
favored men in all matters, how married women had paltry
rights over property, income, employment, or even
custody rights over their own children. A female,
you could not attend Union College, like your brother
Eleazar.
He died at age twenty, before graduation. Comforting
your father, you told him you would try to be
all that your brother would have been. "Oh, my daughter,"
he cried. "If only you were a boy." Decades
later, in your memoir, you wrote of your pain.

Still, you were formally educated, at Johnstown Academy
and the Female Seminary at Troy. Revivalists

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abounded. One terrified you with fires of damnation.
Rescued by father and brother-in-law, you journeyed
to Niagara Falls. Held in its thundering sunlight
you received the healing mists of Nature.

Pretty and lively and smart, you met Henry Stanton,
shared his Abolitionist views and on everything
except women's rights. Yet you married him
and honeymooned abroad. London, 1840:
The International Anti-Slavery Convention.
There you met Lucretia Mott. Women,
you could not participate, sat in a roped-off section,
feeling oppressed. Eight years later, with Mott,
you organized the first Women's Rights Convention
at Seneca Falls, drafted a Declaration
of Sentiments based on the Declaration of
Independence. Frederick Douglass, the famed
Black Abolitionist orator, supported you, spoke.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident," you wrote,
"that all men and women are created equal."

You met Susan B. Anthony. Ideas meshed.
You wrote her speeches. She traveled to deliver them.

When you exchanged your hearth for hazards of
audiences,
you worked with Anthony to organize women, publish
a newspaper, *The Revolution*. You championed labor's
right to strike, called for equal pay for equal
work. You journeyed together by train across country,
speaking, earned money to help educate your children.
Dauntless and witty, you dared to be outrageous.

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With Anthony, you wrote *The History of Woman Suffrage.*
You testified in the Senate for the Sixteenth Amendment,
granting suffrage without regard to sex. The amendment
never left the committee.

Weary of "wandering"
you lectured; exhausted, you worked with Anthony on
volume 2
of *The History.* Soon as the last proofs were read,
daughter Harriot
took you to Europe. In Paris, you lived with son Theodore
and family. In London, with Harriot and hers. Alert
to new ideas, you learned about Fabian socialism
and British secularism. Enjoyed your family; forged
international suffragist connections.

In 1891, you returned home—this time
to New York: the Stuart Apartments, 250 West
94th Street. You lived with daughter Margaret,
widowed like you, and your youngest son, Robert.

What did you see from your window, Elizabeth? Sight
failing
after the years of intense study and writing.
Did you hear the ships on the Hudson? Voices of women—
strong, laughing, shouting, women marching
with colored banners, holding aloft their aspirations
on signs: "Votes for Women." As you sat by the window
of your study, at your slant-top desk, leather-bound
books in cases, among heavy Victorian furnishings,
you drifted toward images of home upstate, young
children
running, boisterous, free. As women were not.

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Your eightieth birthday. Six thousand cheered your speech
at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.
The day after, you sat at your piano and sang
"the old old songs" of your youth. "Bob," you remarked,
"life is a great mystery." But the past held
no pace for your journey. Two weeks later you published
The Woman's Bible, a feminist critique of Scriptures.
And still you wrote.

Susan B. Anthony was planning
to attend your eighty-seventh birthday. Instead,
desolate, she came to mourn you and times together
when you "forged the thunderbolts and I fired them."
Before your casket her photograph stood like a sentinel.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton: figured in history,
in us whom you never knew, but rightly imagined.

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Hannibal Crossing the Alps

J. M. W. Turner, Nicolas Poussin

The canvas: sudden dark snow cloud on the right gathers
the arc of the mountain and storms over
the sun
the earth
the soldiers who
march and keep marching as soldiers do
the bidding of kings and generals, lieutenants, sergeants,
everyone raised above them, higher, higher,
a hierarchy of death, those at the bottom suspecting
they are expendable, expecting the next meal and
the next rest, a little excitement, a skirmish,
a village to pillage, to burn, to take women,
something to ease the aching and the cold.

Hannibal: Your father, Hamilcar Barca,
taught you to hate Rome, while Cato incited,
"Delenda est Carthago,"
Carthage must be destroyed.
Rivalries of power.

Your father took you to Spain.
Raised you in the art of war.
Was killed in battle. You stayed in Iberia.
Served your brother-in-law. When he died,
you took over the army.

Catalogs of battles. Roman ambassadors warned you
not to attack Sarguntum, demanded
satisfaction from Carthage.
The terrible war—

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the Second Punic War—
the "war against Hannibal."
Battle after battle. Lake Trasimene.
Your ambush of Romans
drowned in rivers of their blood.
The living sold into slavery.
And the grand idea:
crossing the Alps
into Rome.

Man went over the mountain
Man went over the mountain
And what do you think he saw?

And what do you think he did?

The canvas: Foreground, left.
Two local tribesmen on a cliff
observe the distant soldiers,
and a figure atop an elephant.
Natives caring for their wounded
signal to comrades on the right
as the procession continues.

"Hannibal Crossing the Alps." Poussin,
two hundred years earlier.
"The great storyteller,"
appraised Bernini. Turner admired,
yet believed, "The sun is God."

Poussin's painting: smaller, somber,
centers the elephant. Hannibal,
helmeted, perches like a worrying bird

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atop Surus, the Syrian war animal.
Pointing ahead, the general
urges his troops onward.

Hind legs of the great beast
seem to buckle. Does he
hear his lost companions,
their agonized trumpeting as they
die in the cold,
see them still plodding,
slipping, pulling, bearing
as they slog over rocks, stones, and mud,
in the fearsome strangeness
of snow and mountains,
while he goes on alone,
carrying this shouting man
among men who prod and scream
and gather in muttering groups
and kneel to cup water near his feet?

In the Frick Museum, Turner canvases face
and flank the visiting Poussin.
Turner sheds light and sky,
nature and people.
Poussin: the ardent
moment,
its ground.

Matters of history. Truths of art.

J. M. W. Turner, *Snowstorm: Hannibal and His Army, Crossing the Alps*, viewed (on loan) at the Metropolitan Museum, Sept. 21, 2008, last day of exhibition. Nicolas Poussin, *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, viewed (on loan) at the Frick Museum, New York, Dec. 5, 2008.

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Mostly Political

No one loves him whom he fears. *Rhetoric*, II
Man is by nature a political animal. *Politics*, III

—ARISTOTLE (384–322 BC)

Today we say all art is political. But I'd say all art has to do with ethics. Which after all really comes to the same thing.

—INGMAR BERGMAN

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“April is the cruellest month . . .”

If Eliot’s April is the cruellest month
and Chaucer’s showers sweet drop acid rain
and every other moon that earthlings meet
radioactivates the harvest grain,

while planes and sunburnt soldiers aim to blow
quivering bodies into acrid dust
thickening air for eons that remind
how history repeats its failed trust,

greed and vengeance grind their rituals
into the backs of people whom they hit,
reap fiery profits from the rudest graves.
Any month is what you make of it.

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Email Surveillance

hops
on my shoulder
looks over it
swims through my gaze
waves from computer screen
floats
on my surfride
dives
into my hard drive

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Polar Icecaps

I'm holding on to the rail, the ride is so fast.
—C. I.

Yes—let's hold on tightly as we watch
the waters rise from melting polar icecaps
where bears float off on floes abducting them—
mystified, diving toward caverns of the sea.

And at an aftertime we'll wonder, too
(a trifle late) where we should emigrate
and just how far inland, and whether erratic
weather there will loose a feral vengeance
like downtown floods we fled to higher ground
uptown, and now once more must flee, abandoning
submerged real estate and soggy towers,
address of sharks and whales and bloated bears
and plankton's avid genes where we began
and might begin again, and then might not.

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Daybreak

Day steps through the window
kisses me on both cheeks.
Formality?
Friendship?

Yesterday morning
started out well—
see what happened.
Should have skipped that one.

People accuse
my naïveté.
Still I like
new light.

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Capitalism

1. the girls

The girls out there are young and scared
stand tall on platform shoes
their pimps at the corner in phone booths
watching

Walking my dog at night I, too, am scared
the crazies must march their torments
that crowd them in small rooms,
the junkies must find pushers
and the drunks disgorge their anger

The girls out there—
set on the block at intervals
stone-eyed
caryatids of their littered turf

I pass them
pimps watching

2. pimps: from the Library glass-enclosed patio

We sit, talking. The girls in the rain
beyond our glass, our caul
walk delicately with umbrellas
as if balancing something of value
on high wires.

Across the street, four pimps stand
under an awning::

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they are splendid in silver and sharkskin
and broad-brimmed hats and rings and canes
and high platform shoes to gauge
their merchandise offered from that level
their gaze like strings like wires pulled taut
for the girls to walk on.

3. questions for an entrepreneur

pimp
did anyone love you little
or hate you then?
is commission
your contact?
are power and poverty
so mixed in you
that the girl you subdue
who trusts you
to protect
her small interest
is your pride
the tarnished iridescence
of a hatband?

did Adam Smith, Vanderbilt, Morgan
or Rockefeller
weave your pallet of prurience?
did they teach you the fun of the profit
the enterprise?
entrepreneur, landlord without land
sultan of slumbodies
you parade their gargoyle emblem
for a pair of new shoes

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in a passing style
for a roll with butter
for a tinkling trinket
and a dream-puffing weed

boss, now
selling your sister

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Turtle

Backing out of the driveway
I feel a crunch
(a fallen branch?)
pull forward over
a soft bump.

Wedged
behind a rear tire:
some yellowish thing,
thick, mottled
like a giant butterfly.
A turtle—crushed open—
intestines glaring.
I try to clear the tread,
prod with shoe tip
what's stuck to bluestone.

Fetch gloves and trowel.
Dig a hasty hole.
Lift the victim
with a paper bag.
Tremors
cease.

Quick-bury
(hide)
with earth with leaves.
Trembling,
I take the wheel.

A car's collateral damage.

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In war, as here, it must be hard
to see what you have done.
And to bear it.

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Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale

Painting by Max Ernst

> At nightfall, at the outskirts of a city, two children were threatened by a nightingale.
>
> —Poem by the artist

I

In the foreground,
a robed girl stands by a gate, holds
a large kitchen knife.
In the blue sky a bird wheels,
an adult flies a child
to safety. Or abducts the child.
Wielding her knife,
girl turns from a body.
On the right: a kind of barn,
cleaver framed above the doorknob.
(In the distance
an equestrian figure
tops a triumphal arch
and rides beside a dome.)

Or is a plane hovering
over intricate linkings
that draw present to past,
glory to simplicity,
murder to rescue?

Look through the day
where sky charges toward you.

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Between sky and barn, doorknob fits a spool.
The spool, blue and brown, is rolling up sky
with earth. Bird, serene,
would escape the scene.

II

I, too, would escape it.
Who falls from the sky?
Not Icarus. He died, seeking height.
He was an idealist. He thought air
was benign. It *was* benign. Now
as bewildered children we look up
at raptorial clouds, at adults
who would seize our lives.

High-tech proficiency
disappears pain
into coordinates
on small screens.

III

If I held my infant
as we hid
in a cellar
would my arms
melt a shield
around it?

Should I—like the adult
abducting/saving the child—
steal *their* children?

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IV

I shall revise the painting
into a livable domain. The girl
holds the kitchen knife but does not use it—
nor does she wish to. She will replace it
in a drawer. Her sibling is napping. The adult
is flying a child to amuse it. The nightingale is not
    threatening, it has been
misinterpreted. The flying adult and child coast on the
    notes
of the bird whose sound lifts them higher. They will travel
as far as they wish and return, exhilarated.

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April 2004

Winter kept regrouping to attack
with scourging winds and rowdy relentless weather
gripping the earth to frost, drawing it back
toward last year's compost heaps and a laggard blizzard,
until one sudden morning on Broadway
I looked up at the cherry trees as they,
too long restrained, like love detained by war,
burst open in a brave fragility
and blossomed their defiant pink and white,
as if the trees like martyrs might redeem
a season or an army overstayed

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A Chipped Tooth

All losses are restored and sorrows end.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Sonnet 30

Playing ringolevio on a Brooklyn street
with a team in a wild, warlike competitive game—
open-mouthed, laughing in panicked delight, I ran
to elude the enemy and touch home base—the iron
telephone pole where I crashed my smile and cracked
a front tooth, chipped it, something a dentist would mend.

Distantly, children of war are playing war games,
learning in earnest where they might hide (if
there is time), how they may face their fears
(if they can), how to bear living with losses
teams can't restore, doctors or parents end.

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New York Epic

O West Side Street that I am—
I dip my toes into the Hudson
my head wreathed in trees of Central Park
asphalt and macadam graft my skin
tall buildings lift my voices
my glimmering children sled
and tub slide down Dead Man's Hill
run to school buy pizza and play ball
blessed by sun rain snow and orderly lives
while at the corner a big-bellied woman
laughs through spaces between her teeth
and sings with musicians the sip of wine left in a bottle

I caress the feet of gleaning-eyed girls
dogwalkers and women in pride of their pregnancy
and wheels of the order boy's bicycle
and roots of wild-armed ginkgoes
I ache with the aged and belch manhole covers
fire little bursts to let off steam
get repaired when and where traffic is heavy
while subway trains rattle my spine
I crawl around Riverside Park
carry the stream of us to the river
the scream in the night
the boombox autos
the gunshot or backfire
the hammering renovations
going co-op or condo

Gray gull hovers above me
Brahms pours out of a window

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pigeonlady carries her breadsack
winterwoman is wearing
a scarf gloves and boots in July

Doormen have ended their strike
lovers in the grass
stirring among dandelions
gather boatcries
make a bouquet
of two colors

Park mother stands among swings and slides
and small children
firming a station of handkerchiefs

And the poet waits with oceanic embrace
with stanchions of praise for the firemen
and neighbors who come to help neighbors
escape the red mountain of cries
from a tenement building spitting out residents
who flee down fire escapes
and fall to wet snow

The poet praises peace marchers
marking the true line of this country
she celebrates the tall ships
slowly grandly moving upriver
and ambulances rushing pain
to sanctuaries
she utters those who have seen
what they cannot bear
and sit in a doorway
of dissolving bones

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I hold them all for awhile
until they drift on
and I am left
with a smear of moonlight

On that September 11th
firemen rode uptown
and walked across me
in ghostly uniforms
in their honor of white dust
the shock time grasping all together
I am steamrollered into its grief
its broken jawbone sidewalks
its arteries torn open
its shredded wires now spliced in me
with rainwind and heatwave
with pipes in me
the subway in me
the waste in me
the blood in me
thickening

I shudder along steel pilings
drilled into foundation of a new building
a fault line quivers to the north
heat-pain awaiting signals from the river
from the cooling ocean
to the deepest hunkering leviathan

Impulse of rain vaults across waters
pelts me with world-horror
triggers chaos around me
wild with Baghdad and Fallujah

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the bomb craters of Kabul
my gutters weep khaki and body parts
wail with prayers from mosques and temples
market air perfumed with sweet breath of dying children
and sparked with random light of exploding eyeballs
drowning in oil ripped from the earth
set afire in the land and on waters
burning me burning this street
burning its heart out
until no one
comes home to me
whole

I am you—your lives run through me within me
I am you and whatever you are intending
stained by indelible ashes blown five miles uptown
in an inconsolable shroud of acrid taste
and trembling trembling trembling
with continuing offense
of a distant folly

Read by the author at the People's Poetry Gathering, May 5–7, 2006, CUNY Graduate Center.

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Wars

There is no way to peace; peace is the way.

—A. J. MUSTE

I am sure what I said is true,—namely, that history . . . at bottom, is the account of the efforts . . . to find freedom and show love.

—JAMES JACKSON PUTNAM

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Those Policemen Are Sleeping

A Call to the Children of Israel and Palestine

Caption: *Four Palestinian police officers lie dead in a Ramallah office building, Saturday, March 30, 2002. The five bodies (one not pictured) all with gunshot wounds to the head, were laying in a dark hallway where the walls were splattered with blood and bullet holes. (AP Photo/ Nasser Nasser)*

Those policemen are sleeping. They lie,
five in a doorway, each one neatly shot in the head,
huddled like derelicts. In the dereliction of death, they cannot guard
Ramallah, or Arafat, or anything or anyone.
They cannot guard children or mothers or old men.
Their blood, no longer confined, dances freely out the doorway
toward blasted olive groves and rubble of bulldozed homes
and shows its sad triumph in the street:
We are fathers, lovers, people like yourselves! it cries.

A few miles away Israeli children are sleeping. Dead in holiday clothes.
A Palestinian boy in pieces among them. They are all sleeping, sleeping,
all belong to one signature. They don't need identification cards
or passports. They don't need to sign in or sign up.
God/Allah/Jehovah welcomes them. It's like a festival in heaven.

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Pesach and Easter, cakes and goodies and traditional sayings,
chanting and singing and hard-boiled eggs,
bitter herbs and date cakes. All the shades sharing one earth,
a single territory, the air sweet above them, the sky a heavenly blue,
while the music of the spheres, like bells of sunlight,
chimes each flight into heaven.

War keeps taking, taking
sucks marrow,
marries the dead to the dead
and the living to the dead.
War is insatiable,
it has a stomach for youth
the delectable sweetness of babies
it spits out old people
it spares lives as lottery prizes.

And faith? What of faith?
I have faith in sunlight, in moonlight,
in a dandelion that gives its bitter food
and plain beauty,
in a smile, in the smell of soap,
in a page turned slowly,
faith in the Jesus of Peace, the Muhammad of Peace,
the Moses of Peace, the Buddha of Peace,
I have faith in the possible footsteps
of Gandhi and King.

What Moloch is this who beckons Israel?
And beckons Palestine?

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Or is it a brave ancestor who fought vainly,
who summons you to his fate?
Is the world better off
for the killing?

Cure yourselves of the past.
It loves only itself.
Its plagues of grief and vengeance
that heavily armor the heart
and seemingly coat it with mail
can be as light as a shroud
or a mirage
in your vision.

Another world is possible.

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To My Unknown Sister in Beirut

Sister unknown sister
your voice reaches me
from cedars shrouded
in the rubble of your house
and from your thirsty streets
that drink blood
and bake bodies
like loaves of flat bread
tossed into the sun

Sister unknown sister
our fearful brother brings bombs
our brother who bought death
from my father
our brother who ate the blood-lust
of his tormentors
He ate their defeat
and they took his victory

And the song of his fighter jets
screams screams
the voices of children who were singing
a people proud to be peaceful

Sister unknown sister
whose dark eyes shadow my escape
are the olives bitter
in your throat?
Their pits embarrass
the politicians
your innocence

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the politicians
your agony
the politicians
Sister my sister
there are lessons
to be learned
from death

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Gulf War

> When the sky is rent asunder; when the stars
> scatter and the oceans roll together; when the
> graves are hurled about; each soul shall know
> what it has done and what it has failed to do.
>
> —Qur'an, 82:1

Eighty thousand sorties nonstop express over Baghdad
a sound-and-light show takeout boxed into your
    livingroom
(you can only see the nightskytop on TV;
the bloody bottom of the picture mars the image).
Look at the stars![1] *look, look up at the skies!*
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
Smart bombs and cruise missiles, F-16 fighter jets,
Patriot antimissiles and rocket hardware.
Everyone wants them now.
(Was this a carnage
commercial?)

In the bomb shelter children are sleeping
in the arms of their mothers. Not hungry,
having supp'd full with horrors.[2]
Are targeted. Deliberately hit.
Well, enemies are enemies.
May hide anywhere.

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Starlight Night."

2. Shakespeare, *Macbeth,* V.v.13. The reference here is to an actual occurrence, in which the air force corrected the misconception that the bombing of an air-raid shelter was accidental.

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Your red-and-white kaffiyeh was edged with lace
crocheted by your mother in the family's pattern.
You wore a blue bead to ward off evil.
It didn't work.

Iraq is a dry place, mostly, dry as cobblestones,
and hot. "Iraq, with its Soviet-style strategy and
Soviet-made arms, was the kind of opponent the Army has
spent decades preparing to fight."[3] No figures, as yet,
on civilian deaths. Maybe a hundred thousand.
Plus a hundred thousand soldiers.
A thousand of theirs to one of ours.
We're still number one.

Try to make sense of it—
boys who will kill other boys who will kill
children asleep in the arms of their mothers
and their mothers asleep with them.
Arms and armaments twist into smoke.
Even the tanks writhe and scream.

Men and women kneel in the prayerful dust
of ancient cities, in the new museum
of bones and shell fragments.
Daily they kneel five times,
facing Mecca.

Between the Tigris and the Euphrates
Mesopotamia once flourished.
The Tigris and the Euphrates
carried great deposits of silt.
The Tigris and the Euphrates

3. *New York Times* editorial, March 30, 1991.

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carry dead bodies to be oiled
in the Persian Gulf.

Cheetah, hyena, wolf, jackal, desert hare,
and small mammals, the jerboa. The vulture,
the raven, the owl, the hawk. In the west
the country is nearly treeless. Places
devoid of vegetation except for
the bush of Christ's thorn.

"Although many think of it as a lifeless place, the desert is actually a teeming, though fragile, ecosystem. Home to a variety of spiders, snakes and scorpions as well as larger creatures like camels, sheep and gazelles, it is literally held together by microorganisms, which form a thin surface crust. This crust catches the seeds of sparse shrubs and prevents surface soil from blowing away. Once it is disturbed—by the maneuvers of a million soldiers, say—recovery can take decades. The Libyan desert still shows tank tracks laid down in World War II."[4]

The Mesopotamian desert is strewn
with the ruins of ancient cities,
their royal tombs and hecatombs. In Sumer,
five dynasties ruled before the Flood.
The first capital was founded at Kish by 4000 BC.
Sippar lay on the edge of the glacial shoreline.
South of Sippar rose Akkad and its armies of Sargon.

4. *Time*, March 18, 1991, 37. Information on Iraq is culled from various reference works.

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Below Cuthah stood the great temples of Kish.
Fifteen miles westward lie the ruins of Babylon.

When the Euphrates changed course, it deserted
its settled embankments. In the south,
lakes became marshland. Now
ancient cities are mounds, waterless, bare.
Kish, Akkad, Babylon, Nippur,
Nineveh, Borsippa, Uruk, Ur.
Levels of excavation
on caravan routes
from Baghdad.

Baghdad, the Abode of Peace, foremost city
of Mesopotamia, preserved the name it has held
for 4,000 years. It was once a fertile land of gardens,
the home of merchants and scholars, renowned for
learning,
for silks and tiled buildings, enlightened caliphs,
tales of the Arabian Nights.

In 1258 Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghiz, sacked the
city.
The Mongols destroyed irrigation systems
and converted Mesopotamia into a desert.

"Already a U.N. report concludes that Iraq has been bombed back to the 'pre-industrial age,' its infrastructure destroyed, its people beset by famine and disease."[5]

5. Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, April 3, 1991.

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I prayed for the people and I prayed for
food, water, electricity, and I prayed
for the museums, that our history not be obliterated
into a footnote of rubble.

"It was a great sight—all those fireworks,
like Christmas," said a U.S. airman.

The tank was running out of gas and the planes kept
coming
and everyone was running and I prayed to Allah that I
not be
burned in the tank and we were just like everyone else,
scared and running like the people on the road,
running to Basra.

"It was a turkey shoot," said a U.S. airman.

"After the third day as I say, we knew that we had them. I mean we had closed the back door. The bridges across the Tigris and Euphrates were out. We had cut highway 8 that ran up the Tigris and Euphrates valley on this side of the river. There was no way out for them. I mean, they could go through Basra. There were a few bridges going across Al Fao to the Al Fao but there was nothing else and there was literally about to become the Battle of Cannae, a battle of annihilation."[6]

6. General H. Norman Schwartzkopf, excerpt from TV interview with David Frost, published the following day in the *New York Times*, March 28, 1991.

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